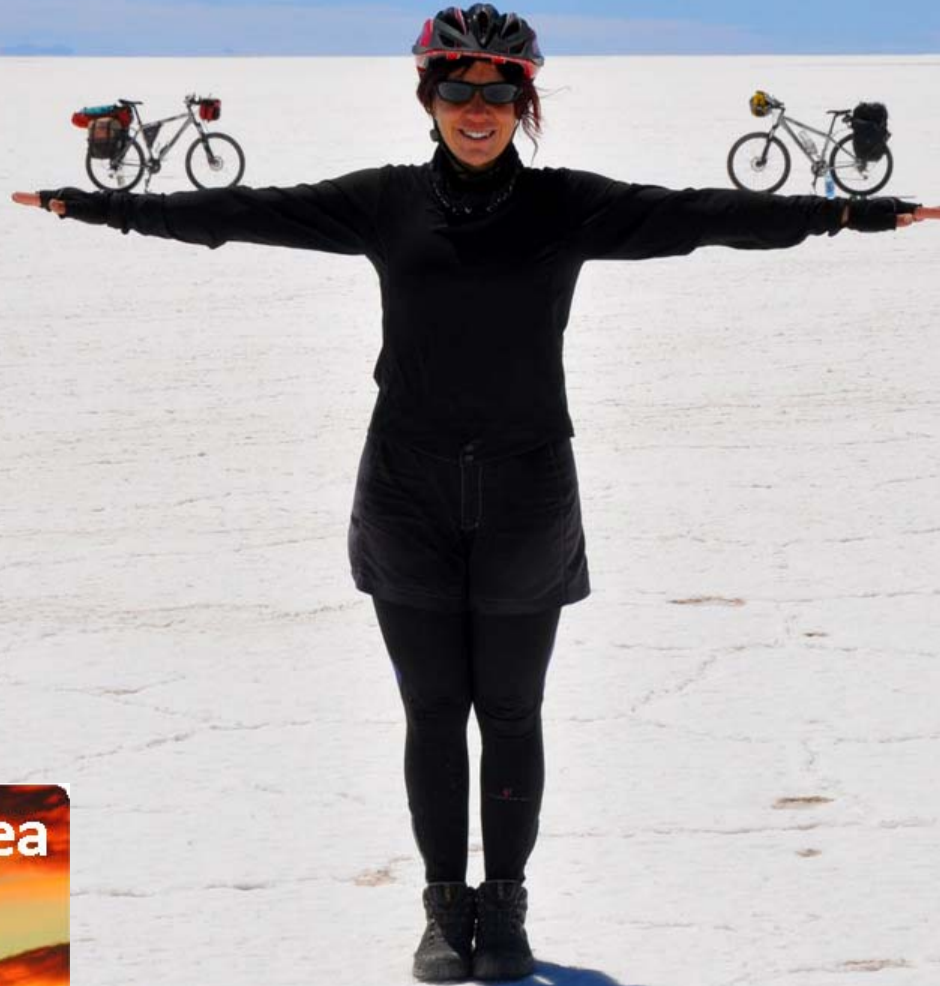


Cycling the Bolivian Sud LÍpez

Crossing El Salar de Uyuni and the Lagoons route



Roadbook created by Judit and Cèsar

<http://www.explorepangea.com/RidingSA/RidingSA.html>

Introduction

Between October 8 and 18, 2011 we pedaled across the region known as Sud LÍpez, on the southwest corner of Bolivia. This is an amazing area of a wonderful country to be explored by bicycle. However, this is a tough ride, not only physically challenging but also mentally demanding. Some of the difficulties will make your body ache. Awfully bumpy dirt roads will spur your mind to look for creative ways of sitting on your saddle. The lack of oxygen will require more effort for any movement and the cold temperatures won't help to get a pleasant night sleep. On top of that, the strong winds, the absence of wind breaks and the few spots where to can get a treat for your sweat will undermine your morale.



Salt. Just salt.

The rewards are countless though. Riding on such an infinite salt flats is something you cannot experience in many places. Kilometers and kilometers of just pure white salt, where distances are not what they seem, where rocky islands float in the air and optical illusions confuse your eyes. Odd rock formations and caves and colorful volcano ranges. Hot springs, grey, red, green and white lagoons with flocks of flamingos feeding on their sulfur smelly waters are some of the wonders awaiting for you.

If you are strongly fit and have a great power of will, please go for it. You will not regret it!!

General description

The entire route is about 550 Km (340 mi) and except for the downhill to San Pedro de Atacama, it all happens over 3.600 m (11.800 ft) of elevation. This route starts in Uyuni. From Uyuni it goes to Colchani and enters the Salar de Uyuni till the Inkawasi Island. From here, the classic route (see www.tour.tk) heads South towards Chuvica and San Juan de Rosario, but we went Southwest towards Aguaquiza and San Pedro de Quémez. This alternative offers a more isolated ride on the salar away from the jeeps and a visit to the Galaxies Grotto. San Pedro de Quémez is the last village you can buy food and water. After that, you will only find a few hotels or restaurants to get provisions.

From San Pedro we continued to the Ejército de Roca (Rock Army), the Salar de Chiguana and rejoined the classic route at the Chiguana military post. Here we split again and went SouthWest riding to the southern tip of the Salar de Chiguana, instead of South. Our route saves a rocky climb by merging with the international road sooner than the classic route. We joined it after the Ollagüe volcano viewpoint. From here we followed the classic way. We left the international road and climbed a mountain pass towards the lagoons section. The first lagoon is Laguna Cañapa where you probably will see the first flocks of flamingoes. Short after that one is the Laguna Hedionda (Stinky). Here is where we saw more flamingoes and also at a much closer distance. The Eco-Lodge Los flamingos is at its shore and offers lodging and a restaurant. They also sell food and water. After that, there are a few more lagoons before the Paso del Inca. This is not really a mountain pass but a crack in the rock where the road goes through. The road keeps climbing up to 4.670 m (15.322 ft.) and then drops down towards the Hotel del Desierto junction. The hotel is 1.8 km (1.1 mi) from the junction. If you can afford it, it's a nice place to stay and refuel before the toughest section of the route.

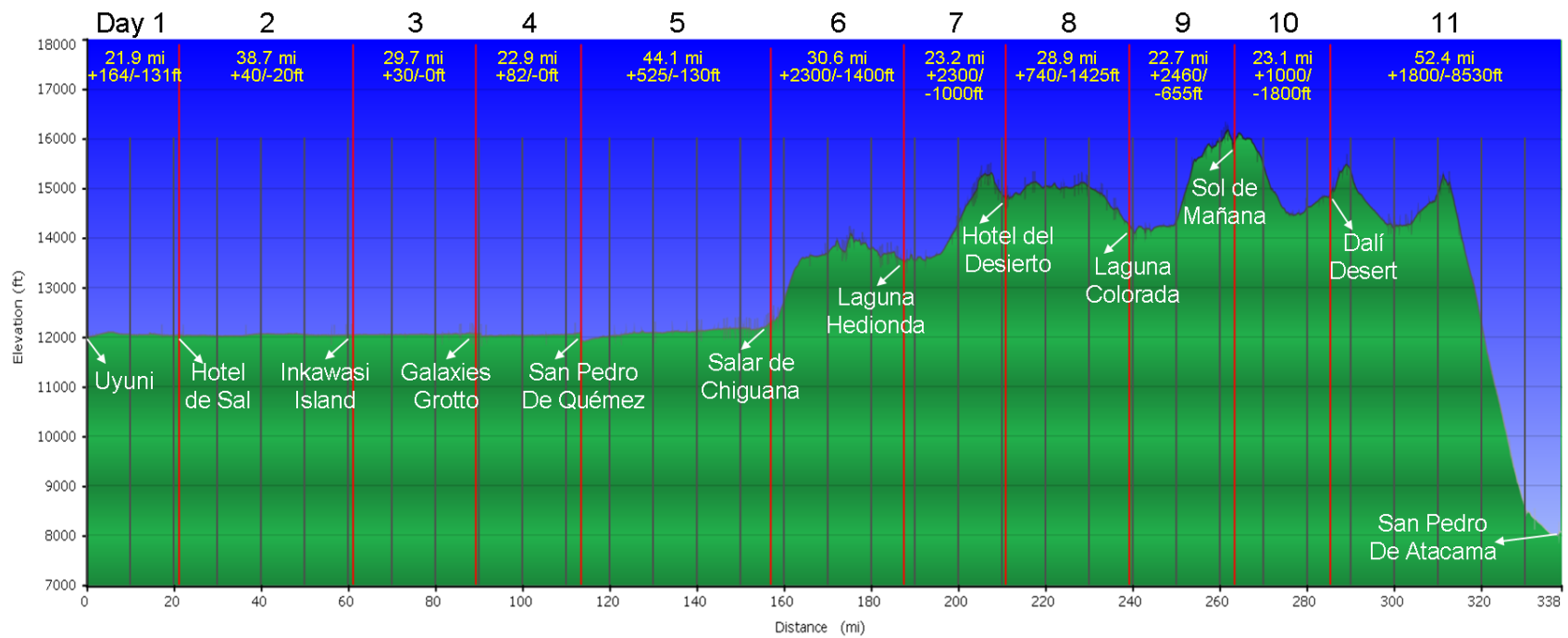
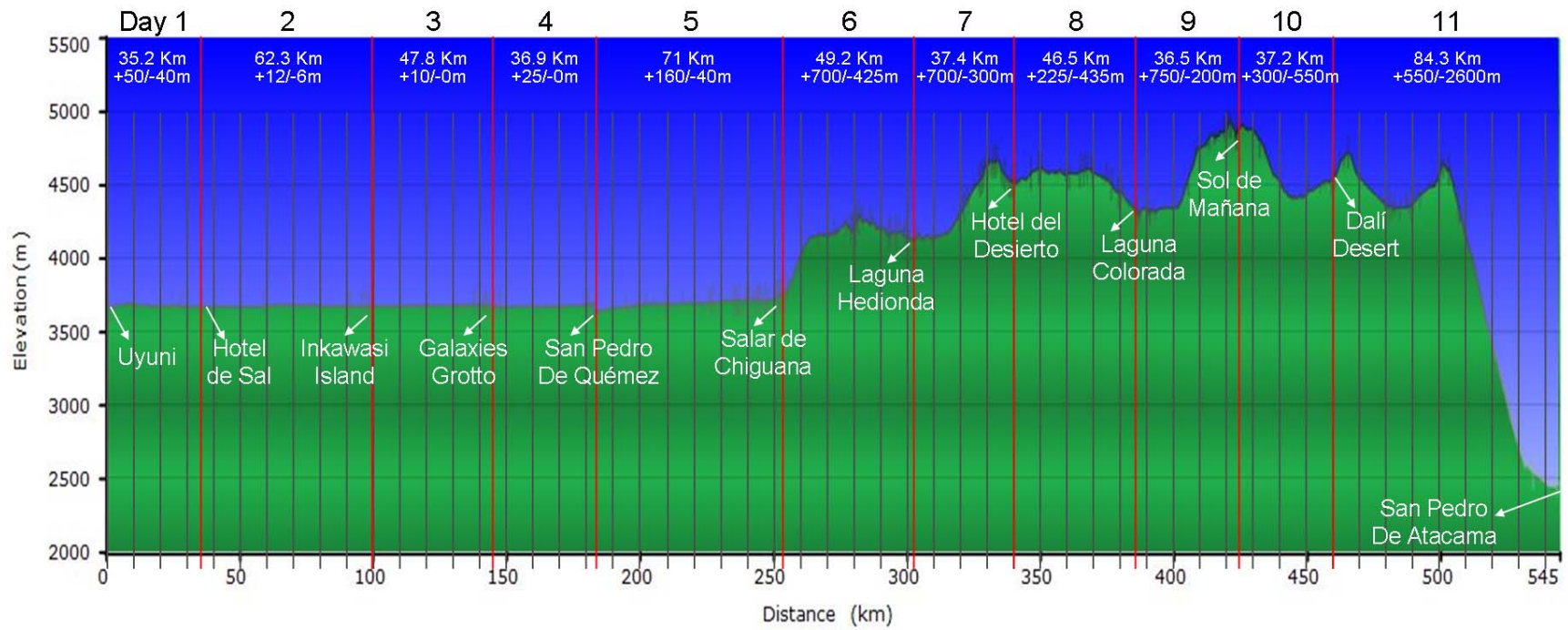


Out of the hotel, the road (at the time we did it) was in awful conditions, with the worst washboard we have ever seen. You will arrive at the famous *Árbol de Piedra* (Rock Tree), a peculiar rock formation eroded by the relentless winds. The road gets better as you get closer to the spectacular *Laguna Colorada* (Red Lagoon). The color of the water is really red due to the microorganisms that live in it. Right after the Eduardo Avaroa ticket booth, there is a small community with a couple of places to stay and a couple of stores to buy basic items. From this community, there is a trail that ends in an elevated viewpoint over the lagoon. In our case, we saw the more intense red waters in the morning when the wind was calm.

The next point of interest is the *Sol de Mañana* geyser field (Morning Sun). This comes right after the highest point of the route at 4.936 m (16.194 ft). The caldera lays at a little lower elevation. These are not actual geysers but whooshing fumaroles. The best time to see them is at sunrise but get prepared for a very cold night if you decide to camp here. Our water bottles froze inside the tent. Next is the hot springs right passed the *Laguna Chalviri* where a restaurant serves food and sells cookies, water and sodas. After that comes the *Dalí Desert* with beautifully colored peaks and then the *Paso del Cóndor*, another mountain pass over 4.500 m (4.717 m, 15.476 ft).

Following is the *Laguna Verde* (Green Lagoon) with the stunning *Licancábur* volcano in the background and the *Laguna Blanca* (White Lagoon). Enjoy this especially amazing section. When riding along the *Laguna Blanca* shore, look back to the *Paso del Cóndor* to admire the colors of the mountains. There is a place to stay at the *Laguna Blanca* shore, but the one at the park exit is in much better conditions. They also serve and sell food. Climb for the last time in now a much much better road towards the border post. Keep climbing on the Chilean side till you hit the pavement. Still climb a little more and fly down to *San Pedro de Atacama*.

The following images show the profile for the entire route in kilometers and meters or miles and feet. For a daily profile and detailed route description go to the *Roadbook* section of this document.



Road conditions and weather

Road conditions was the number one difficulty for us. It was the mix of sand, gravel and rocks but mainly the washboard that made it hard to pedal. The locals name for washboard is calamina. It makes all your bones shake, your butt sore and loosens your bike screws. Although we only found a few short stretches where we actually had to push the bikes, our average speed and daily distances were on the low side. We never felt lost or had doubts about which road to take. In several cases, especially in wide open land, the jeeps create numerous tracks but sooner or later they all merge back in an obvious single one. Traffic is low but at least you would see a jeep every couple of hours. If in doubt, ask the drivers for directions.



Hole in the salt crust

During the wet season or after heavy rain, some sections of the Salar de Uyuni may be flooded. Also the Salar next to San Pedro de Quémez may be impassable due to muddy terrain. Ask the drivers or guides for the most up to date conditions.

Wind was definitely not helping. The pattern was a gentle morning breeze from the North that pushed us to some extent but turning into strong West wind after noon. Since the route is mostly North to South there was not much head wind fighting but nonetheless strong side wind always wear you down.

Nights were cold, especially when camping. Above 4.500 m (14.750 ft) the water in the bottles was partially frozen in the morning even inside the tent. The chill factor was considerable at high altitude especially in the morning and afternoon.

Sun is strong and although not warm at this altitude, it can burn your skin. It's even worse when you combine it with the dry cold wind.

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the excellent work Sonya and Aaldrik (www.tour.tk) did in collaboration with the rest of the contributors to their pdf. That compilation of information was very useful when we were planning our trip.

We would also like to thank Alex and Ping for their review and additional notes to this document. They were the ones putting San Pedro de Quémez on the map ☺ (<http://osm.org/go/NK6X3q9W4->). We met in San Pedro de Atacama after we finished the route. They did it in the opposite direction. For more information about their adventures go to <http://horizonsunlimited.com/tstories/cyclingchile>

RoadBook

Day 1: From Uyuni to the Hotel de Sal	(35.2 Km, +50 -40 m)	(21.9 mi, +164 -131 ft)
Day 2: From the Hotel de Sal to the Inkawasi island	(62.3 Km, +12 -6 m)	(38.7 mi, +40 -20 ft)
Day 3: From the Inkawasi island to the Galaxies Grotto	(47.8 Km, +10 -0 m)	(29.7 mi, +30 -0 ft)
Day 4: From the Galaxies Grotto to San Pedro de Quémez	(36.9 Km, +25 -0 m)	(22.9 mi, +82 -0 ft)
Day 5: From San Pedro de Quémez to the end of the Chiguana Salt Flats..	(71 Km, +160 -40 m)	(44.1 mi, +525 -130 ft)
Day 6: From the end of the Chiguana Salt Flats to Laguna Hedionda	(49.2 Km, +700 -425 m)	(30.6 mi, +2300 -1400 ft)
Day 7: From Laguna Hedionda to Hotel del Desierto	(37.4 Km, +700 -300 m)	(23.2 mi, +2300 -1000 ft)
Day 8: From Hotel del Desierto to Laguna Colorada	(46.5 Km, +225 -435 m)	(28.9 mi, +740 -1425 ft)
Day 9: From the Laguna Colorada to Sol de Mañana geysers	(36.5 Km, +750 -200 m)	(22.7 mi, +2460 -655 ft)
Day 10: From the Sol de Mañana geysers to the Dalí desert	(37.2 Km, +300 -550 m)	(23.1 mi, +1000 -1800 ft)
Day 11: From the Dalí desert to San Pedro de Atacama	(84.3 Km, +550 -2600 m)	(52.4 mi, +1800 -8530 ft)

Day 1: From Uyuni to the Hotel de Sal (35.2 Km, +50 -40 m) (21.9 mi, +164 -131 ft)



Salinera

This first day is fairly easy, both for the conditions of the terrain and its flatness. A good section of the dirt road towards Colchani goes parallel to the salt flats. It's easy to see optical effects over the salt like buildings and islands floating in the sky.

Once past Colchani, the road enters the salar and the dirt gradually becomes salt. It seems unnatural to ride on salt. The texture and the crushing sounds resemble like riding on compacted snow. The first landmark on the Salar is the monument remembering the tourists who died when 2 jeeps crashed and burst into flames. One wonders how could that happen in this vast landscape with no obstacles and such a good visibility? Maybe drunk drivers? Watch out!!

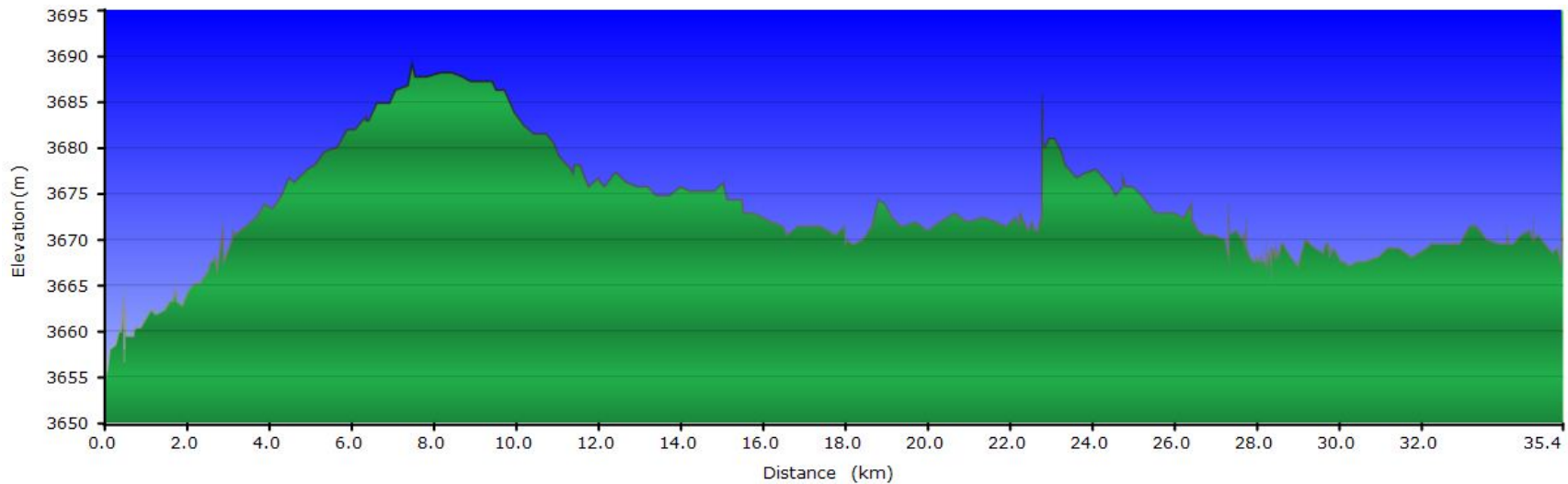
Half Km (0.3 mi) later there are piles of salt and pools where water is evaporated to extract salt. This area of the salar is wet all year round and salt will stick to your bike frame and other components. The next point of interest is the Eyes of the Salt Flats (Los Ojos del Salar), where water springs bubble out (see picture to the right). From here, follow the main jeep tracks for about 6 Km (3.7 mi) to find the Salt Hotel. All the organized tours stop there, regardless of where they go next, so the tracks should be fairly evident.

It is not recommended to camp in the middle of the salt flats. It is well known that the chutos (car thieves) cross the salar at night at high speeds from Chile (where they steal the cars) to Bolivia.



Ojos del Salar

Elevation profile for Day 1:



Distance	Elevation	Waypoint name	Terrain and route description
0 Km 0 mi	3.655 m 11.991 ft	0101ToñitoHotel	The road towards Colchani is good.
2.9 Km 1.8 mi	3.666 m 12.027 ft	0102AirportJunction	Keep straight.
15.5 Km 9.6 mi	3.672 m 12.047 ft	0103Railway	Cross the railway.

22.2 Km 13.8 mi	3.669 m 12.037 ft	0104Colchani	Leave the road and enter the village to the left.
26.3 Km 16.3 mi	3.672 m 12.047 ft	0105CasaDeSal	Keep straight.
27.6 Km 17.2 mi	3.670 m 12.041 ft	0106Monument	Follow the main tracks to the right.
28.1 Km 17.5 mi	3.670 m 12.041 ft	0107Salinas	The main tracks will take you directly to the Hotel de Sal. Veer slightly right to get to Los Ojos del Salar (the Salt Flats Eyes).
29.5 Km 18.3 mi	3.668 m 12.034 ft	0108Ojos	Natural springs flowing through the salt crust.
35.2 Km 21.9 mi	3.670 m 12.041 ft	0109HotelDeSal	Formerly a hotel, now a museum, this house holds a number of salt statues and other objects. Except for the roof and windows, all the walls, tables and chairs are made of salt bricks.

For a full version of the Roadbook and the GPS track, go to <http://www.explorepangea.com/RidingSA/06Bolivia/Uyuni.html>.

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